



Sermons from Poland Presbyterian Church

“From the Many to the One”

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Philippians 3:7-16

July 15, 2007

“...this one thing I do....”

-Phil. 3:13

Let us pray:

We come to this moment in worship, O God, ready to hear you speak. Speak to us in crystal clear tones. Guide us by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, that in your truth we may find freedom, that in your will we may discover peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some years ago an article appeared in a religious magazine, the Methodist magazine *Response*. The article was written by a Presbyterian pastor and suggested that the decade ahead would be a time for traveling light. Soon after the piece appeared the author received a letter from a woman in a Midwestern state. He subsequently included the letter in a book he wrote, first, to show that people will occasionally find in a message directives that were not intended; and, second, because the sentiment expressed in the letter conveys a mood that most of us have flirted with at one time or another. Let me quote the letter:

Dear Sir:

We are taking your advice – “Choose Life and Travel Light” – as it appeared in the April issue of *Response*.

We are selling our house and furniture and moving into a camper, so all our possessions will be contained in that. And we’re moving – we intend to see the country. Our mail will be sent to General Delivery in the next small town. We’ll

be members of no particular church, club, or organization. No more meetings, no more committees – we’ve had it up to here.

We’ve both been active in the local church and conference, but we’ve found that they can get along very well without us. You’re only needed when you produce the way the man in charge wants you to. Any ideas of yours are nil.

Your advice came as a fresh drink of water. Run away, who doesn’t? Everyone runs from something. The young people hate possessions, but they have their hot little hands out for our money and help.

So if you see one more trailer on the road – it’s us.

Which of us has not longed to pull up stakes and take to the open road? Which of us has not chafed under the demands of whatever system it is that puts clothing on our back and bread on our table? Which of us has not yearned to shuck those close-fitting responsibilities and be free?

Come now, haven’t there been times when you at least felt *pricing* a camper?

When I read that letter the thing that stands out for me is its sincerity. There’s a certain sadness to it. One senses regret between the lines, a wish that things hadn’t gone that way. The writer had given it a good try. Perhaps she was tired. Nothing looks good to us, even the work of God, when we are exhausted. It has been rather well established that 25 percent of the people in a congregation give 75 percent of the money. My judgment would be that it’s equally true that 25 percent of the people in a congregation do 75 percent of the work.

Those of us involved in leadership, inside the church and out, do well to remember not to exploit the willing. It is possible to burn good people out before their time. The old saying is true: *the violin bow always taut soon loses its resiliency.*

At any rate, the woman decided that she would now go in for generalized living as opposed to particularized living: nature over people, travel over roots, campfires over committees. Right at our elbow all the time is the temptation to live *extensively* instead of *intensively*.

We would like to climb every mountain and sail every sea, drive every road, fly every plane, sip every wine, leaf through every interesting magazine, check out every interesting movie, read every good book, sample every delicacy.

For that matter, none of us is wholly content with the casual confinements of a single career, a single mate, a single lifetime and the same-old-repetition of scenery. Each desires to live out all kinds of lives, to exert all powers and receive all adulations, to suffer and enjoy every sort of passion, to possess all the women (or men) that ever

yielded or refused to yield – in short, to play the Faust in an endless series of exploits and triumphs.

At times we all want to move away from our problems and set up shop somewhere else.

Bruce Springsteen in one of his songs shouts: “I want to change my clothes, my hands, my face!”

Someone has likened life – *living life* -- to working a crossword puzzle. You know how you begin in the upper lefthand section until you mess it up. Then you’ll move to the upper right and drop down the right side to the lower right corner. Then to the lower left and up, supposing/thinking that when you get stuck somewhere you can move on and start over indefinitely. Always, however, you are eventually forced to face the fact that the puzzle is one piece. And that’s how it is with life.

That’s something that has certainly made itself felt in my life every time I have moved from one place to another.

To keep moving away from life’s difficult situations only postpones payday, it does not cancel it.

Certainly Jesus in a hundred different ways stressed the importance of relationships over going places and collecting things. We have a need to associate in depth with other people, and with God,-- not just loose association, not just easy commitment.

Saint Paul knew this. What made St. Paul the stellar Christian that he was, was the fact that after having been a religiously active man in many ways for many years he submitted to the singular claims of the living Christ: “*This one thing I do,*” he said.

He is no longer a generalist, a mere inquirer. Once self-directed, he is now God-directed: “*Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:13-14).

His magnificent obsession with Christ threw him into a new succession that involved him with particular people in particular places. Had campers been available in Paul’s day I’m sure he would at least have looked at ads in the paper, for Paul had his troubles with people. It would have been easier to leave Corinth, for instance, than to try to communicate with those ingrates in the church there.

I think that many times we get ourselves into trouble because, unlike Paul, we give up too soon on people and places. We expect too much from a specific situation, a specific person, a specific group of people. We take the best of what we have known in one place or relationship, and the best we have known from another place or relationship, and the best from another and so and so on, and put it all into an impossible composite image, and then hold a job, a relationship, a church up against it. We fantasize impossible

combinations out of the best that we have known and then expect one particular home or church or job to produce it all.

The rule suggests itself that when we pass from the many to the one, that is, when we move from broad generalizations to specific life situations – when we pass from the many to the one --- we cannot expect that *one* to possess all the best features of the *many*.

I.

Think of marriage and the home.

As young men and women mature it is fairly normal that they will “play the field” a bit in their dating. But it is altogether critical when passing from the many to the one, that they not expect their bride or their groom to combine the finest qualities of all the other women or men they have known.

He can't have Mary's looks and Susan's personality; Lisa's tenderness and Laura's figure; Tina's money and Debby's brains; and Cheryl's parents. And, of course, it works the other way around for the expectations of the bride for her husband. In the old service of marriage the question was put to the man: “Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, and forsaking all others (singly or in combination) keep thee only unto her?” And to the woman the question: “Wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, and forsaking all others (singly or in combination) keep thee only unto him?”

This is the critical moment, when we pass from the many to the one. The concern is no longer with femininity or masculinity, or womanhood or manhood at large, but with this woman, this man, this person. Some men remain bachelors, and some women bachelorettes, rather than risk moving from the many to the one.

But we must pass from the many to the one because this is how we grow, how we mature.

II.

Or think of the point as it relates to work.

There is an enormous amount of vocational unrest in our society. So many people want out of where they are. Even ministers.

When I was fourteen or fifteen it was no trick at all for me to hold in mind the possibilities of being a lawyer, a doctor, a city planner, and a news reporter. Youth is the time to generalize, to fantasize. Even though there's more vocational mobility today than in years past, there's still a limit to this kind of movement. We cannot make unlimited moves – moving from one job to another to another, always imagining that somewhere else we could be more happily employed.

And yet we fantasize in the composite. We'd like to have the expense account of a salesman, the vacation of a teacher, the glamour of an actress, the prestige of a college president, the income of a doctor, the hours of a plumber, and the independence of a judge.

What we don't think about is how long the doctor studied to get where he or she is. What we don't think about is how the plumber longs for higher social status. What we don't think about is the briefcase the judge totes home every night. What we don't think about are the hours of rehearsal that the actress grinds out day by day.

When we stop thinking mythologically and extensively and instead think more realistically and intensively, we can ask God to put a spire on our work right where we are! If only we could see what we do and where we are for what it truly is --- a place of crucial ministry!

III.

Or again think of the point as it relates to church affiliation.

We have a lot of church-hoppers these days, ministers included. A large part of this vocational unrest again stems from, finds its origin in this myth of the composite. I know ministers who have a picture in their minds of the best of all the churches they have ever visited or served. They like the air-conditioning of one church, the choir of another, the folksiness of a third, the salary of another, the study leave of still another. And they're always hankering after going somewhere else, getting off somewhere else – to another church.

On the members' side there are people in every congregation who are also caught up in this myth of the composite. I remember a family who once belonged to the church I served in Grand Rapids. I'll call the husband John; that isn't his real name. John and his family left our church for another church that supposedly had a more dynamic youth program. I ran into John a few years later in a grocery store and asked how things were and I discovered in the course of the conversation that he and his wife and kids had moved on again to another church, this time because their newest church had a better preacher. A year or two after that I ran into John at a baseball game. His son and my son Danny were playing on opposite teams, and I learned that John and his family were now at another church. They'd switched again because the worship music was better, more to their liking. Whether he'd admit to it or not, John and his wife were looking for it all.

But no one church can have it all. Instead of trying to realize what is impossible, isn't it the better part of wisdom to move from the many to the one wherever we might happen to be, accepting the mix of assets and liabilities, the pluses and minuses, there to worship and serve God alongside each other with as much vitality as we can command?

When we pass from the many to the one, we can't expect the one to possess all the best features of the many. It belongs to our maturity as human beings – not to mention our maturity as Christians – to move from the many to the one.

Unless the good lady who wrote that letter is of retirement age, she is regressing, moving back from the one to the many.

What is love if not locally expressed?
What is vocation if not something done
 in a specific place?
What is Christian commitment if its object
 is not singular,
 if it doesn't tie us to a given fellowship?

God's love is the model – a love that came down to earth, that got all tangled up in the particularities of our history. For God did not choose to save us by writing in the sky, but by the gift of a child, a man, a cross, an empty tomb.

So, let us trust our sample of life.
We haven't got it all, but no one has.

Let us run not some imagined, ideal race,
but as Saint Paul put it:
“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead”
 let us
“press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

.....“this one thing I do....”

Closing Prayer

O Lord, as you did not disdain
to set your love and do your work
 in the midst of the particular,
keep us faithful to the gospel where we are;
lest in dreaming of times and places more ideal
we should fail you here and now.
As you have loved, so may we love,
 by your spirit and by your power.
 Amen.